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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 002409

SIPDIS

SA FOR DAS GASTRIGHT

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TAGS: KISL PHUM PGOV PTER BG

SUBJECT: WIDENING SPLITS AMONG BANGLADESHI ISLAMIST GROUPS

REF: 04 DHAKA 0888

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 d.

¶11. (C) Summary. There is a widening, public split between mainstream Jamaat Islami and other, more extreme Islamist groups driven by ideological, personal, historical, and even material factors. While IOJ could drop out of the ruling coalition, the JI-BNP alliance -- grounded solidly in political expediency -- looks secure. End Summary.

Growing Rumbles

¶12. (C) Factions of the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), a member of the ruling coalition, and AMM Bahauddin, owner/editor of the anti-US/pro-Saddam/pro-Islamist Daily Inquilab newspaper, are spearheading a move to unite a large number of Islamist groups against the mainstream Jamaat Islami (JI) and undermine the BNP-led coalition. The two principal leaders of this move have material grievances against the BDG. Fazlul Haq Aminee, MP and chairman of one of the three IOJ factions, has been lobbying the BDG hard since at least December 2003 for a cabinet seat. a push that coincided with the revival of anti-Ahmadiya agitation, which he strongly supported. He also reportedly wants a license to open a bank. Bahauddin, meanwhile, tried and failed to get a license for a satellite TV channel called Inquilab TV. (Note: Recently freed journalist Shoaib Chowdhury, who had been detained since 2003 on sedition charges for trying to go to a conference in Israel, was the channel's managing director.)

¶13. (C) Aminee, citing BDG attempts to expand the curriculum at quomi madrassas to include science and English, complains the BDG is "cracking down" on these madrassas and the Islamist groups, like his, which support them. (Note: During the 2001 election, alleged anti-madrassa actions by the Awami League (AL) led the Islamists' objections to the AL government.) In September 2004, Aminee told us that three senior AL leaders met with him to propose a political understanding. AL leaders subsequently denied this to us but there is good reason to believe some sort of meeting occurred. Aminee has a long history of publicly criticizing the BDG; in private, he says it is dictatorial and mercenary. On March 17, Aminee and other IOJ leaders demanded that the BNP expel the two JI ministers for allegedly licensing a company to produce alcohol and for allowing prostitution in Bangladesh.

¶14. (C) Mufti Ijharul Islam, former SYG of Aminee's IOJ faction and since March chairman of his own faction, says he left Aminee because he could not abide his criticism of coalition partners BNP and JI. "When we formed the alliance with JI, we knew we had religious differences with them," he said. "What has changed about JI that we should oppose them now?" The AL, he told us, had been trying for a year to persuade him and Aminee to defect. When he refused, he said, the AL asked him to speak publicly about the religious differences between JI and Deobandi ulama. Islam insists he declined but suggests Aminee did not. On May 23, Islam alleged to us that India has funneled funds to Aminee and Bahauddin to undermine the ruling coalition.

Nothing New

¶15. (C) Maulana Syed Abul Ala Moududi is the founder and guiding light of JI. Deobandi ulama condemned his advocacy of political Islam. When Moududi founded JI in 1941, they declared him a "deviated" person because he mixed politics with religion. Moududi's book, "Caliphate and Monarchy" in 1967, produced allegations that he was a conspirator against Islam and fatwas were issued instructing Muslims not to associate with JI. According to IOJ's Ijharul Islam, there are three major differences between Moududism and traditionalist ulama: Moududi does not attribute the same level of innocence and purity to Prophet Muhammad as do the ulama, Moududi found weaknesses in the personalities and abilities of some caliphs and companions of the prophet, while ulama believe they are beyond reproach, and Moududi did not have formal Islamic training and was therefore unfit to interpret Islam for others.

16. (C) Maulana Shamshul Haq, one of the few prominent Islamic scholars asserting some appreciation for Moududism, withdrew his support from JI after "Caliphates and Monarchy" and wrote a book called "Correcting Mistakes" that declared it illegal for a Muslim to support JI unless Moududi corrected his mistakes. Similarly, praying with such people was declared invalid. Other ulama issued fatwas that included banning marriage to JI supporters. On May 21, Haq's own political party, Khelafat Majlis, split into two groups when one faction rejected Haq's six-point declaration condemning Moududism and Shia'ism, among other things. The splinter group consists mostly of former JI activists who found JI too flexible ideologically. After Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971 and secularism was included in the new constitution, some traditionalist ulamas joined with JI leaders to form the Islamic Democratic League once the AL was ejected from power in 1975. The JI gradually rebuilt its political base, rendering the IDL insignificant, and ulama started joining political Islam in the form of a respected scholar known popularly as Hafezzi Huzur, who ran for president in 1981. In a surprise move, Huzur visited Iran and recognized Shias as acceptable Muslims. After Huzur's death, his party mutated into what became the core of the IOJ.

17. (C) The JI and IOJ drew closer during the 1996-2001 AL government, but differences were apparent soon after the four-party coalition came to power. IOJ leaders charged that JI amir Nizami was vain, ignored the IOJ, and did not support their demand for a separate Arabic university authorized to affiliate with quomi madrassas. In addition, they said, Nizami failed to oppose strongly enough USG actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and he did not support their anti-Ahmadiya campaign. After the BNP candidate lost the May 9 Chittagong mayoral election, Inquilab newspaper and IOJ leaders blamed JI "betrayal" and declared the JI a political liability for the BNP.

Going Public

18. (C) On May 12, leaders of different Islamist groups, minus JI, gathered at a seminar organized by Inquilab's Bahauddin in Dhaka to discuss the need for political unity in the next election. Asked about the possible beneficiary of such a move considering the small vote banks of the non-JI Islamist groups, Bahauddin expressed indifference about who comes to power next. IOJ leaders reiterated their criticism of JI as an "un-Islamic" force and a "deviated" group like Ahmadiyas.

JI's Response

19. (C) JI leaders strike a generally relaxed view about these developments. Some note that the JI won 18 parliamentary seats on its own in 1991, and that Bangladeshis traditionally ignore ulamas' political guidance. JI, one said, is a complex party that draws its support from civil society and educated people who are pious but understand the modern world. IOJ leaders, however, are ignorant of modern economics, science, and international relations, and are jealous of JI's success and influence. Another JI leader told us Nizami has several times tried and failed to persuade Bahauddin to stop his anti-JI activities.

Comment

10. (C) Political Islam in Bangladesh is a vertically-integrated enterprise with JI as its political center (reftel). However, it is not a monolith and Bangladesh's many Islamist groups have important ideological, historical, personal, and even material issues that push them apart. The agenda of these groups is predominantly domestic, although anti-U.S. rhetoric, fueled by incidents associated with the GWOT, is on the increase, even if it is still lower than in many Muslim countries. Political expediency, and not much else, binds the JI and BNP, and that is unlikely to change before the next election. Other groups, like IOJ, however, could move more openly into anti-government terrain, intensifying Islamist activism against the Ahmadiyas and other alleged affronts to Islamist orthodoxy. The upsurge in anti-Ahmadiya attacks in April, the JI's defensive denial of involvement and condemnation of its Islamist rivals as an extremist embarrassment, and the BDG's belated move to curb again the attacks should be seen in this broader context of widening Islamist differences.

THOMAS